

## Introduction

A book with the provocative title *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* requires some comment on the terminology used. I will begin with the term “mysticism” in general, then discuss the implications of the modifier “Jewish” – the phases of Jewish mysticism and the viability of the notorious concept of mystical union (*unio mystica*) – continue with remarks on the quest for the “origins” of Jewish mysticism, and conclude by elaborating the principles that will guide me through my inquiry and outlining the book’s structure.

## Mysticism

Any attempt to define mysticism in a way that allows the definition to be generally accepted is hopeless. There is no such thing as a universally recognized definition of mysticism, just as there is no such thing as a universally recognized phenomenon of mysticism or notion of mystical experience. In fact, there are almost as many definitions of the term as there are authors – if the authors even bother to define the object of their study at all. Mystical experiences differ greatly from culture to culture; the particular cultural and religious conventions within which a “mystic” lives make his or her mystical experience culturally specific. This becomes immediately clear from the very use of the words “mysticism” or “mystic,” which derive from the Greek root *myein*, meaning “to shut the eyes”; accordingly, the *mystikos* is someone who shuts his or her eyes in order to shut out the mundane world and experience other realities. Hence the derivative *myeō*, “to initiate into the mysteries,” and more frequently the passive *myeomai*, “to be initiated.” More specifically, the *mystēs* is the one who is initiated into the Greek mystery cults and who participates in secret rituals that dramatize certain myths (such as the mystery cult at Eleusis, as early as the seventh century BCE). The *mystikos* or the *mystēs*, therefore, is connected to the “mysteries” of these mystery cults; that is, the word acquires also the coloration of secrecy and privacy.

No one today would claim that this very specific meaning of initiation into mystery cults prevailed as a common denominator in all or even many later manifestations of mysticism – although, to be sure, the notion of “secrecy” and “mystery” remained an important aspect of what might be dubbed “mysticism.”

Hence, despite its explicit connection with ancient mystery cults, “mysticism” is, in modern scholarly terminology, not an emic but an etic term, that is, a term that was not actually used by the people who practiced mysticism (clearly not in antiquity) but was invented by modern scholars in order to define and classify certain religious experiences. In this respect, “mysticism” is akin to that other notoriously problematic term, “magic” – a term that some scholars want to exorcize from the politically correct scholarly vocabulary.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, if we look at certain definitions of mysticism in handbooks of religion or in popular dictionaries, we encounter some striking common features.<sup>2</sup> Take, for example, the following definitions in the German *Brockhaus Enzyklopädie* and in the British *Oxford English Dictionary*. The *Brockhaus* runs as follows:

Mysticism [the original Greek *myeomai* translates as “to be initiated,” literally “to have one’s eyes and mouth closed”], a structural form of religious experience and life in which the *unio mystica* – an intrinsically experienced unification (*Einung*) of the human self with the divine reality – is achieved.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, e. g., Philip Alexander, “Response,” in Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan, eds., *Gershom Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: 50 Years After* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1993), p. 82; Marvin W. Meyer and Richard Smith, eds., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), pp. 4ff. On the problems resulting from such an approach, see Henk S. Versnel, “Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion,” *Numen* 37 (1991), pp. 177–197, and Yuval Harari’s recent attempt to go beyond a pragmatic use of the category “magic” (see his “What Is a Magical Text? Methodological Reflections Aimed at Redefining Early Jewish Magic,” in Shaul Shaked, ed., *Officina magica: Essays on the Practice of Magic in Antiquity* [Leiden: Brill, 2005], pp. 91–124). Using the notion of “family resemblance” and resorting to the “partial resemblance” of certain phenomena, he tries to avoid any essentialist or substantialist definition of “magic” (as opposed to “religion”). I wonder, however, how sentences such as “The density of the web of partial resemblance ties is what determines whether they are definitely [!] more or less magical or religious. ... The web of partial resemblance creates a fabric, varying in its density, in which religious and magic phenomena [!] are tied together” (*ibid.*, p. 115) avoid relapsing into the essentialist mode.

<sup>2</sup> It is by no means my goal here to attempt an even approximate account of the major definitions suggested by historians of religion; I merely give some examples that I find instructive. For further information, see, e. g., the “classic” contributions by William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longman, Green), 1902 (esp. pp. 366ff.); Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*, 12th ed. (London: Methuen, 1930, repr. 1967 [first published 1911]); Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1909, repr. 1923); *idem*, *New Studies in Mystical Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1927); Emily Herman, *The Meaning and Value of Mysticism* (London: Clark, 1922); Louis Dupré, “Mysticism,” in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 10 (London: Collier Macmillan, 1987), pp. 245–261.

<sup>3</sup> *Brockhaus Enzyklopädie in Zwanzig Bänden*, vol. 13 (Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1971), p. 141. The German version reads: “Mystik [zu grch. *myeomai* ‘eingeweiht werden’; eigentl. ‘sich Augen und Mund schließen lassen’], eine Strukturform relig. Erlebens und Lebens, in der die *unio mystica* – die wesenhaft erfahrene Einung des menschl. Selbst mit der göttl. Wirklichkeit – erreicht wird.”

This definition limns mysticism as an essential structure of religious life in which the *unio mystica* is attained, the unification of the human self with divine reality; that is, mysticism is a particular variety of religion having as its most prominent characteristic the *unio mystica*.<sup>4</sup>

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is more comprehensive but likewise emphasizes the mystical union of man and God. Here, the term “mysticism” captures

[t]he opinions, mental tendencies, or habits of thought and feeling, characteristic of mystics; mystical doctrines or spirit; belief in the possibility of union with the Divine nature by means of ecstatic contemplation; reliance on spiritual intuition or exalted feeling as the means of acquiring knowledge of mysteries inaccessible to intellectual apprehension.<sup>5</sup>

The first sentence is not very helpful because the “opinions” and so forth of “mystics” or “mystical doctrines or spirit” only shift the problem from “mysticism” to “mystics” or “mystical”: what then, pray tell, are “mystics,” and what is “mystical”? Then comes the major characteristic, the “union with the Divine nature,” obviously avoiding the word “God” and preferring instead the vague “Divine nature” and adding some important qualifications: ecstatic contemplation, exalted feeling, acquiring knowledge of mysteries as opposed to intellectual apprehension. “Ecstasy,” “feeling,” and “knowledge” are characteristics that play an important part in most definitions of mysticism. But it cannot be stressed enough: the ultimate goal according to this definition is the union of man with God. Some scholars even go so far as to boldly proclaim, “That we bear the image of God is the starting-point, one might almost say the postulate, of all Mysticism. *The complete union of the soul with God is the goal of all Mysticism.*”<sup>6</sup>

There is, however, one problem with this definition. Whether or not it fits a religion such as Judaism we will see, but what about religions that do not presuppose the existence of a transcendent God and the human soul, that is, religions

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly enough, this definition has become much less assertive – and loses the *unio mystica* – in the more recent nineteenth Brockhaus edition of 1991 (vol. 15, p. 268): “Mysticism [the original Latin *mysticus* translates as “mysterious,” from the Greek *mystikós*], ... a multi-level phenomenon that is difficult to pin down and which in its various cultural manifestations is common to all religions. Mysticism designates the direct experience of a divine reality that transcends everyday consciousness and rational perception.”

<sup>5</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, vol. 10 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 176.

<sup>6</sup> William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism: Considered in Eight Lectures Delivered before the University of Oxford* (London: Methuen, 1899, Appendix A), p. 339 (my emphasis in italics). Scholem refers to this appendix in his *Major Trends* (below, n. 10), p. 4, without giving the precise bibliographical details. Unfortunately, the appendix has disappeared in later editions of Inge’s book, and one frustrated reader added (on p. 333 of the 1956 edition) the handwritten note, “What [expletive] happened to the famous Appendix?” On the concept of the mystical union in general, see Ileana Marcoulesco, “Mystical Union,” in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 10 (London: Collier Macmillan, 1987), pp. 239–245.

that are not based on the Hebrew Bible with its notion of human beings “in the image and likeness of God”? Hindu and Buddhist mysticism, for example, suggest that the world and nature are illusions and that the deepest and truest “unity” is achieved when awareness of the self and its connection with the world is annihilated, thus interrupting the fatal cycle of reincarnation. This kind of mysticism is called “acosmic” or “world-negating.” Other religious systems prefer the mystical experience of a unity or oneness with nature instead of God, following the pantheistic idea that nature constitutes the Absolute behind and beyond all reality: God is everywhere and in everything, a notion that obviously challenges the concept of a personal God. A prominent example of a Christian mystic who expressed a pantheistic view of the oneness of nature and man’s unity with nature is Meister Eckhart (1260–before 1328): “All that a man has here externally in multiplicity is intrinsically One. Here all blades of grass, wood and stone, all things are One. This is the deepest depth.”<sup>7</sup>

Here mysticism is not the union or rather unity with the Absolute, let alone a personal God, but the awareness of the inherent unity of all beings. God is part of this unity because he is part of nature and nature is a part of God. The idea of a personal God as the goal of the mystic has become so remote that Meister Eckhart was suspected of being a pantheist and heretic, denying the essential difference between God and his creation.<sup>8</sup>

An outstanding example of mystical union with nature, a kind of “secular mysticism,” is the famous poem *Tintern Abbey*, by William Wordsworth (1770–1850), that celebrated representative of the “romantic revolt” in England:

[...] For I have learned  
 To look on Nature not as in the hour  
 Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
 The still, sad music of humanity,  
 Nor harsh, nor grating, though of ample power  
 To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
 A presence that disturbs me with the joyces  
 Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
 And the round ocean, and the living air,  
 And the blue sky, and the mind of man –

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism*, trans. Bertha L. Bracey and Richenda C. Payne (New York: Macmillan, 1932 [repr. 1957, Meridian Books, New York]), p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> The archbishop of Cologne accused him of heresy, and in 1329 Pope John XXII declared some of Eckhart’s propositions heretical and others suspicious of heresy. See Otto Karrer and Herma Piesch, eds., *Meister Eckeharts Rechtfertigungsschrift vom Jahre 1326: Einleitungen, Übersetzung und Anmerkungen* (Erfurt: Kurt Stenger, 1927); G. Théry, “Édition Critique des Pièces Relatives au Procès d’Eckhart Contenus dans le Manuscrit 33<sup>b</sup> de la Bibliothèque de Soest,” *AHDL* 1 (1926–1927), pp. 129–268.

A motion and a spirit that impels  
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
 And rolls through all things.<sup>9</sup>

In view of these difficulties – not only of those emerging from Eastern religions – modern scholars tend to suggest more nuanced definitions of mysticism. As my two prime examples I have chosen Gershom Scholem, the founding father of the academic discipline of Jewish mysticism, and Bernard McGinn, the eminent expert on Christian mysticism. In the introductory chapter of his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (first published in 1941), which bears the optimistic title “General Characteristics of Jewish Mysticism,” Scholem asks, almost despairingly: “[W]hat is Jewish mysticism? What precisely is meant by this term? Is there such a thing, and if so, what distinguishes it from other kinds of mystical experience?”<sup>10</sup> To answer this question he first summarizes what we know about mysticism in general. He begins by praising “the brilliant books written on this subject by Evelyn Underhill<sup>11</sup> and Dr. Rufus Jones” and by quoting Jones’s definition of mysticism in his *Studies in Mystical Religion*: “I shall use the word mysticism to express the *type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence. It is religion in its most acute, intense and living stage.*”<sup>12</sup> Then Scholem moves back to what he calls Thomas Aquinas’s brief definition of mysticism as *cognitio Dei experimentalis* – a knowledge of God through experience.<sup>13</sup> The latter in particular, he argues, is guided by the biblical verse Psalms 34:9: “Oh taste and see that the Lord is good.” The tasting and seeing of God is what “the genuine mystic desires ... determined by the fundamental ex-

<sup>9</sup> William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” in *The Pedlar. Tintern Abbey. The Two-Part Prelude*, ed. with a critical introduction and notes by Jonathan Wordsworth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 37f., l. 89–103.

<sup>10</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1974 [repr.]), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> See above, n. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, p. XV (Jones’s emphasis).

<sup>13</sup> Scholem quotes Aquinas according to Engelbert Krebs, *Grundfragen der kirchlichen Mystik dogmatisch erörtert und für das Leben gewertet* (Freiburg: Herder, 1921), p. 37. Apparently Scholem did not bother to check the original context of the quotation from Thomas, because there (*Summa theologiae* II.2, quaestio 97, art. 2 arg. 2) it belongs to the question as to whether or not it is a sin to tempt God, and has nothing to do with mysticism. In his refutation of the premise that “it is not a sin to tempt God,” Thomas distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge of God’s goodness (*bonitas*) or will (*voluntas*), one speculative (*speculativa*) and the other affective or experiential (*affectiva seu experimentalis*). It is through the latter knowledge that a human being “experiences in himself the taste of God’s sweetness (*gustum divinae dulcedinis*) and complacency in God’s will (*complacentiam divinae voluntatis*),” and it is only in this affective-experiential way that we are allowed, according to Aquinas, to prove God’s will and taste his sweetness. In quoting Aquinas, Krebs focuses solely on the experience of God’s goodness or sweetness and completely suppresses the connection with God’s will.

perience of the inner self which enters into immediate contact with God or the metaphysical Reality.”<sup>14</sup>

Both definitions serve Scholem, however, in rejecting two of their major presuppositions. The first is the notion of *unio mystica*, the mystical union of the individual with God. This term, he posits, “has no particular significance” in mysticism in general and in Jewish mysticism in particular: “Numerous mystics, Jews as well as non-Jews, have by no means represented the essence of their ecstatic experience, the tremendous uprush and soaring of the soul to its highest plane, as a union with God.”<sup>15</sup> He briefly refers to the very different experiences of what he labels the earliest Jewish mystics of talmudic times (in his terminology, the “old Jewish Gnostics”) and the latest offshoot of Jewish mysticism, the Hasidim of Eastern Europe, and concludes: “And yet it is the same experience which both are trying to express in different ways.”<sup>16</sup>

The second rather useless presupposition, according to Scholem, is the assumption that “the whole of what we call mysticism is identical with that personal experience which is realized in the state of ecstasy or ecstatic meditation. Mysticism, as an historical phenomenon, comprises much more than this experience, which lies at its root.” So, although within certain strands of mysticism we do find mystical union and ecstasy – the two most cherished elements of many modern definitions of at least Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism – they are useless as parameters in defining both mysticism and Jewish mysticism alike. What remains is mysticism as a historical phenomenon, to be described and analyzed within the framework of other religious phenomena and in different and changing historical contexts: “The point I should like to make,” Scholem concludes, “is this – that there is no such thing as mysticism in the abstract, that is to say, a phenomenon or experience which has no particular relation to other religious phenomena. There is no mysticism as such, there is only the mysticism of a particular religious system, Christian, Islamic, Jewish Mysticism and so on.”<sup>17</sup> Definitions, in the end, prove to be futile.

Finally, in Scholem’s view, there is still yet another danger lurking in the all-too-sweeping definitions of mysticism: they confuse religion with mysticism and

<sup>14</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5. It is therefore simply wrong to maintain, as Elliot Wolfson does, that “the mystical experience, according to Scholem, involves a direct and intimate consciousness of the divine Presence that, in the most extreme cases, eventuates in union with God” and that “from Scholem’s own standpoint the vast majority of Jewish mystical sources fall somewhat short of the ideal that he himself set up, which involves unitive experience” (Elliot Wolfson, “Mysticism and the Poetic-Liturgical Compositions from Qumran: A Response to Bilhah Nitzan,” *JQR* 85 [1994], p. 191). Scholem set up no such ideal but stated explicitly and unequivocally that the term *unio mystica* “has no particular significance” for many mystics, “Jews as well as non-Jews.”

<sup>16</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5 f.

conclude that “*all* religion in the last resort is based on mysticism,” a mistake for which he quotes Rufus Jones’s definition as a prime example that he does not want to repeat.<sup>18</sup> Instead he favors an evolutionary model of religion in three stages, of which only the third and last stage witnesses the birth of mysticism. The first stage is that of a naïve harmony between man, universe, and God and where there is no need for ecstatic meditation. The second stage may be called the classical stage in the history of a religion, in which religion becomes institutionalized and is characterized by a vast abyss between God and man. Yet it is at this stage – “more widely removed than any other period from mysticism and all that it implies”<sup>19</sup> – that mysticism is born. Borrowing a turn of phrase from Nietzsche,<sup>20</sup> it is the birth of mysticism out of the spirit of the institutionalized and classical form of religion, a form and period of religion, moreover, that may be labeled romantic.<sup>21</sup> At this stage, all religious concepts (above all the ideas of creation, revelation, and redemption) “are given new and different meanings reflecting the characteristic feature of mystical experience, the direct contact between the individual and God.”<sup>22</sup>

If we now turn to McGinn’s definition of mysticism, we discover a number of important points of agreement with Scholem, but also points of agreement with other, more general definitions that Scholem ultimately rejects. McGinn aims at a broad and flexible definition of mysticism and discusses it under three headings in the “General Introduction” to his monumental *The Foundations of Mysticism*.<sup>23</sup>

1. Mysticism is always a part or element of *religion*. All mystics believed in and practiced a religion (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism), not “mysticism”; that is, mysticism is a subset of religion, part of a wider historical whole. Even when it reaches a level of explicit formulation and awareness, it remains inseparable from the larger whole, never becoming independent of religion.

2. Mysticism is a *process* or *way of life*. The goal of the mystic (whatever this is) shall not and cannot be isolated from the life of the individual. The individual is part of a community, and this relationship between individual and community also needs to be determined in any proper evaluation of the individual’s mysticism.

3. Mysticism is an attempt to express a direct or immediate *consciousness* of the *presence of God*. This is the most important part of McGinn’s definition. He is very careful in his choice of words, in particular “consciousness” and “pres-

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6f. (my emphasis).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (Leipzig: E. W. Fritzsch, 1872).

<sup>21</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1: *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1992), pp. XIff.

ence.” “Presence” is a deliberate substitute for “union,” a word that McGinn finds rather problematic:

If we define mysticism in this sense [as some form of union with God], there are actually so few mystics in the history of Christianity that one wonders why Christians used the qualifier “mystical” so often (from the late second century on) and eventually created the term “mysticism” (first in French, “la mystique”) in the seventeenth century.<sup>24</sup>

Because “union” might not be the most suitable category for an understanding of mysticism and because there were several, perhaps even many, understandings of union with God, McGinn suggests expanding the notion of union and finds the

term “presence” a more central and more useful category for grasping the unifying note in the varieties of Christian mysticism. ... From this perspective, it comes as no surprise that union is only one of the hosts of models, metaphors, or symbols that mystics have employed in their accounts. Many have used it, but few have restricted themselves to it. Among the other major mystical categories are those of contemplation and the vision of God, deification, the birth of the Word in the soul, ecstasy, even perhaps radical obedience to the present divine will. All of these can be conceived of as different but complementary ways of presenting the consciousness of direct presence.<sup>25</sup>

The other term in the third part of his definition, “consciousness,” is a deliberate substitute for “experience,” a word that he finds imprecise and ambiguous:

The term mystical experience, consciously or unconsciously, also tends to place emphasis on special altered states – visions, locutions, rapture, and the like – which admittedly have played a large part in mysticism but which many mystics have insisted do not constitute the essence of the encounter with God. Many of the greatest Christian mystics [...] have been downright hostile to such experiences, emphasizing rather the new level of awareness, the special and heightened consciousness involving both loving and knowing that is given in the mystical meeting.<sup>26</sup>

From these quotations we can easily see that McGinn and Scholem<sup>27</sup> agree most with regard to what is summarized under (1): mysticism as part of a concrete historical religion. Also (2) would certainly find Scholem’s approval (although he does not dwell on this particular aspect when discussing the problem of defi-

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XVI.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XVII.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. XVIII f.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly enough, the recent definition of mysticism by Philip Alexander, a Jewish studies scholar, comes very close to that of McGinn. Alexander suggests that the following three characteristics are shared by most concrete mystical traditions (*Mystical Texts: Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and Related Manuscripts* [London: T. & T. Clark International, 2006], p. 8): (1) mysticism arises from the religious experience of a transcendent divine presence; (2) the mystic enters a close relationship with this divine presence that can be described in theistic systems as “communion” and in pantheistic systems as “union”; and (3) mysticism always requires a *via mystica*.



dition). As for (3), however, this is more complicated. Scholem and McGinn share the reluctance of granting the notions of *unio mystica* and personal experience too much sway in any definition of mysticism, but I do not think that Scholem would approve of McGinn's substitute, the consciousness of direct divine presence. For this comes surprisingly close to Jones's definition ("direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence"), which Scholem rejects as too general because it blurs the distinction between "religion" and "mysticism." But Scholem has made things a bit too easy for himself by failing to suggest an alternative and instead contenting himself with the emphatic statement: "I, for one, do not intend to employ a terminology [such as used by Jones] which obscures the very real differences [between "religion" and "mysticism"] that are recognized by all, and thereby makes it even more difficult to get at the root of the problem."<sup>28</sup>

## Jewish Mysticism

"Jewish mysticism" is obviously a subset of "mysticism," and it will be useful to continue with Scholem and to see how he delineates the former within the framework of the latter. The main bone of contention seems to be the nature of that "fundamental experience" encountered by the mystic in his relationship with the divine, in particular whether it can or cannot be subsumed under the category of "mystical union." Before we go into such detail, however, it is necessary to examine first how Scholem (and his successors) define and describe Jewish mysticism historically, that is, as a historical manifestation within the larger context of the Jewish religion.<sup>29</sup>

### 1. Phases of Jewish Mysticism

Since, according to Scholem, mysticism arises out of the classical stage of a given religion, it will come as no surprise that for him, Jewish mysticism begins with the talmudic period and continues, with many variations, up to the present day. At least this is what he asserts in his introductory chapter, "General Characteristics of Jewish Mysticism."<sup>30</sup> In the second chapter of *Major Trends*, the chapter dealing with Merkavah mysticism (the first full-fledged system of Jewish mysticism), he is more generous and grants the first phase of Jewish mysticism

<sup>28</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> For a useful overview, see Philip S. Alexander, "Mysticism," in Martin Goodman, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 705–732.

<sup>30</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 18: The uninterrupted mystical chain leads from the talmudic hero Rabbi Aqiva to the "late Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the religious leader of the Jewish community in Palestine and a splendid type of Jewish mystic."

its beginnings in the first century BCE, thus clearly predating the talmudic period.<sup>31</sup> He opens this chapter with the programmatic statement:

The first phase in the development of Jewish mysticism before its crystallization in the mediaeval Kabbalah is also the longest. Its literary remains are traceable over a period of almost a thousand years, from the first century B. C. to the tenth A. D., and some of its important records have survived.<sup>32</sup>

Here we learn in two sentences many important (and some problematic) things. First, there are several phases of Jewish mysticism that are bound together by the term “mysticism.” The first of these phases is Merkavah mysticism, that peculiar mystical movement that, as we will soon discover in greater detail, revolves around the divine throne in heaven. This is clear enough and can hardly be contested. Second, Scholem distinguishes between “Jewish mysticism” and “Kabbalah”: Jewish mysticism begins in antiquity, but it somehow “crystallizes” in what is called “Kabbalah” in the Middle Ages. “Kabbalah” seems to be the epitome of Jewish mysticism, but Scholem does not bother to explain why the manifestation of mysticism before the Kabbalah is just “mysticism” and mysticism’s medieval strand “Kabbalah” proper – yet he nevertheless calls his book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. When in 1962 he published a book in German titled *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*,<sup>33</sup> he took for granted that distinction between “Jewish mysticism” and “Kabbalah.”<sup>34</sup>

Third, and most important for our purpose, the boundaries in both directions (forward and backward in time) of the first phase of Jewish mysticism are less obvious. Whereas Scholem’s strategy for extending the first phase into the tenth century is clearly an attempt to narrow the gap between his first and second phases, Merkavah mysticism and Hasidism in medieval Germany (approximately 1150–1250 CE), he remains remarkably vague with regard to the beginning of the first phase. Although he has declared that the first phase, Merkavah mysticism, begins in the first century BCE, he is reluctant to put it into its full historical context. “It is not my intention here,” he states at the outset,

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<sup>31</sup> Whether the first century BCE belongs to the “classical” period of Judaism is another issue, but it is certainly part of the “institutionalized” form of the Jewish religion – the other characteristic of Scholem’s definition of the “romantic period” out of which Jewish mysticism emerged.

<sup>32</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 40.

<sup>33</sup> Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1962. English translation *Origins of the Kabbalah*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, trans. Allan Arkush (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>34</sup> The first sentence of the first chapter reads: “The question of the origin and early stages of the Kabbalah, that form of Jewish mysticism and theosophy that appears to have emerged suddenly in the thirteenth century, is indisputably one of the most difficult in the history of the Jewish religion after the destruction of the Second Temple” (*Origins*, p. 3). At least we get the additional information here that the Kabbalah would appear to have emerged “suddenly” out of the common ground of Jewish mysticism.

to follow the movement [of Merkavah mysticism] through its various stages, from its early beginnings in the period of the Second Temple to its gradual decline and disappearance. ... I do not, therefore, intend to give much space to hypotheses concerning the origins of Jewish mysticism and its relation to Graeco-Oriental syncretism, fascinating though the subject be. Nor am I going to deal with the many pseudepigraphic and apocalyptic works such as the Ethiopic book of Enoch and the Fourth Book of Ezra, which undoubtedly contain elements of Jewish mystical religion. Their influence on the subsequent development of Jewish mysticism cannot be overlooked, but in the main I shall confine myself to the analysis of writings to which little attention has hitherto been given in the literature on Jewish religious history.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this restrained attitude toward the earlier manifestations of Jewish mysticism before the appearance of Merkavah mysticism in the technical sense of the term, Scholem is convinced that “subterranean but effective, and occasionally still traceable, connections exist between these later [Merkavah] mystics and the groups which produced a large proportion of the pseudepigrapha and apocalypses of the first century before and after Christ”<sup>36</sup> and that “the main subjects of the later Merkavah mysticism already occupy a central position in this oldest esoteric literature, best represented by the book of Enoch.”<sup>37</sup> So he ultimately (and boldly) concludes that we can actually delineate three stages of Merkavah mysticism, that first phase of Jewish mysticism, namely

1. “the anonymous conventicles of the old apocalypics”;
2. “the Merkavah speculation of the mishnaic teachers who are known to us by name”; and
3. “the merkavah mysticism of late and post-Talmudic times, as reflected in the literature which has come down to us [Hekhalot literature].”<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, Scholem not only eschews any substantial treatment of the “apocalyptic stage” of Merkavah mysticism – let alone that he does not make an attempt to prove the historical connection between the alleged Merkavah speculations of the “old apocalypics” and the Mishnah teachers of rabbinic Judaism or the Merkavah mystics presented in the Hekhalot literature – in his description he leaves his second stage almost completely out, his chapter on Merkavah mysticism drawing solely on the Hekhalot literature (although he was convinced, and became ever more so in his later writings, that the heroes of Hekhalot literature – most prominent among them R. Ishmael and R. Aqiva – were identical

<sup>35</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* On Scholem’s approach, see also the very useful summary by Martha Himmelfarb, “Merkavah Mysticism since Scholem: Rachel Elior’s *The Three Temples*,” in Peter Schäfer, ed., *Wege Mystischer Gotteserfahrung: Judentum, Christentum und Islam/Mystical Approaches to God: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2006), pp. 19–22.

with the famous rabbis as we know them from the rabbinic literature).<sup>39</sup> So all that in fact remains of Scholem's three stages of the first phase is just the third and last stage.

This result is highly unsatisfactory, and scholars after Scholem have tried to fill the gaps. Whereas the second gap (the "rabbinic stage" of Merkavah mysticism) was effectively eliminated by David Halperin in his thorough analyses of the rabbinic Merkavah texts<sup>40</sup> – although, to be sure, other scholars are still convinced of a close relationship between the Merkavah speculations of the rabbis and the Merkavah mysticism of the Hekhalot literature<sup>41</sup> – the first gap (the "apocalyptic stage" of Merkavah mysticism, as Scholem defines it, and the relationship between the apocalypses and Hekhalot literature) was perceived more constructively and filled in with ever more details. Ithamar Gruenwald wanted to establish, along the lines of Scholem's taxonomy, an unbroken continuity between the early apocalypses and the Hekhalot literature,<sup>42</sup> but Martha Himmelfarb cautioned against too naïve an approach with regard to these two after all very different bodies of literature.<sup>43</sup> Most recently, Andrei Orlov, focusing on the Enoch-Metatron traditions, reopened the question and tried to resuscitate Scholem's approach despite its acknowledged shortcomings, which, he holds, were responsible for the shift in modern research from the apocalypses to the Hekhalot literature.<sup>44</sup> He accuses Halperin, me, and others of throwing out the baby with the bathwater and, in our predilection for the rabbinic and Merkavah mystical manifestations of early Jewish mysticism, not only of ignoring the earlier phases but even of blocking access to them:

Despite the significant advance that the investigations of Schäfer, Halperin, and other opponents of Scholem's position brought to a better understanding of the conceptual world of the rabbinic and Hekhalot mystical developments, their works, in my judg-

<sup>39</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 42f. (despite his somewhat twisted reservations there).

<sup>40</sup> *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1980); see also his *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988).

<sup>41</sup> See, e. g., Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 121 ff.; April D. DeConick, "What Is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism?" in eadem, ed., *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), pp. 3f.

<sup>42</sup> Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1980).

<sup>43</sup> Martha Himmelfarb, "Heavenly Ascent and the Relationship of the Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature," *HUCA* 59 (1988), pp. 73–100.

<sup>44</sup> Andrei A. Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), p. 3: Scholem's inability to demonstrate textually the persistent presence of the matrix of early Jewish mysticism in the pseudepigraphic literature would later lead his critics to concentrate their studies mainly either on the rabbinic *ma'aseh merkavah* accounts or on the Hekhalot writings and to regard these literary evidences as the first systematic presentations of early Jewish mysticism.

ment, affected negatively the study of the premishnaic Jewish mystical testimonies. Their writings shifted the whole notion of early Jewish mysticism towards the rabbinic and Hekhalot documents and separated it from the early mystical evidence of Second Temple Judaism. The criticisms of Scholem's hypothesis have led to the refocusing of priorities in the study of early Jewish mysticism. The main focus of research has been transferred from pseudographic evidence to the rabbinic *ma'aseh merkavah* and the Hekhalot writings in an attempt to show their conceptual independence from the early apocalyptic materials. The view that the Hekhalot tradition possesses its own set(s) of concepts and imagery, different from the conceptualities of the early apocalyptic mystical testimonies, should not however lead one to ignore the association of these texts with early Jewish mysticism. It is apparent that, despite its importance, the body of Hekhalot literature cannot serve as the ultimate yardstick for measuring all early Jewish mystical traditions.<sup>45</sup>

Much as I agree with Orlov's last sentence, I am at a loss with regard to his main critique. True, research on the Hekhalot literature and Merkavah mysticism has made some progress over the last twenty-five years or so, but I, for one, did not embark on a study of the Hekhalot literature in order to prove Scholem wrong and to demonstrate that the concepts and imagery of the Hekhalot traditions were distinct from those of the apocalypses (when I started my work on the Hekhalot manuscripts I couldn't have cared less about the apocalyptic literature). No doubt, publication of the *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* has triggered an avalanche of publications on Merkavah mysticism,<sup>46</sup> but I do not think that this has much to do with Scholem's failure to make a good case for his first stage of the first phase of Jewish mysticism.

Moreover, and even more important, it soon became clear that the gap in Scholem's presentation of the three stages of Merkavah mysticism was even larger than Scholem could have known when he wrote his *Major Trends*: still undiscovered were the Dead Sea Scrolls, which contain a number of texts – in particular the Hodayot (Thanksgiving Scroll) and the text that is now labeled Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice – that, as scholars immediately observed, bear a striking resemblance to the Hekhalot literature. Although he later became aware

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 5f. See also James R. Davila, "The Ancient Jewish Apocalypses and the Hekhalot Literature," in DeConick, *Paradise Now*, pp. 105–125. Davila concludes that in his view, "a genetic relationship of some sort [!] between the descenders to the chariot and the ancient Enochic traditions and practitioners seems likely" (p. 123). Although he acknowledges the very late social context for the "descenders to the chariot" (namely, "Babylonia in the fifth to the seventh centuries CE"), he nevertheless believes that "at least in the case of the Enochic literature, a historical link [between the earlier Enoch traditions and Enoch-Metatron in the Hekhalot literature] does seem plausible" (p. 124).

<sup>46</sup> A very useful summary of the present state of scholarship can be found in Ra'anan S. Boustán, "The Study of Heikhalot Literature: Between Mystical Experience and Textual Artifact," *CBR* 6 (2007), pp. 130–160.

of these connections,<sup>47</sup> Scholem never took up the subject systematically.<sup>48</sup> Conspicuously, it is this gap (the Dead Sea Scrolls) within the first gap (prerabbinic apocalyptic literature) that has occupied scholars far more as a potential precursor of Merkavah mysticism than have the apocalypses.

The most ambitious attempt not only to fill the gaps in Scholem's taxonomy of early Jewish mysticism but also to give a comprehensive picture of Scholem's first phase, including the Dead Sea Scrolls and related literature, has been made by Rachel Elijor. In a series of articles and in her book, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism*,<sup>49</sup> Elijor programmatically claims to have taken up the legacy left by Scholem in his few remarks, thanks in large part to the publication of most of the Qumran library and our greater knowledge of the context of the writings preserved in this library.<sup>50</sup> It is hardly my intention here to give a full summary of her arguments – a difficult task, to be sure, not only because of the richness of the material but also because she often repeats and sometimes even contradicts herself – but the following observations seem to me important:<sup>51</sup>

1. Elijor does not just deal with the Qumran literature (both the sectarian and nonsectarian works preserved in the Qumran library) but sees much of the Qumranic and related literature (including, in particular, the Enochic literature) as the reservoir from which the full picture of pre-Hekhalot mysticism emerges.

2. Like Scholem, she reconstructs three stages of early Jewish mysticism, but these stages are different from Scholem's, namely (1) Ezekiel's vision of the Merkavah in Ezek. 1; (2) the literature of the "deposed priests" of the Sec-

<sup>47</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1960, 1965), pp. 3f., 29, 128.

<sup>48</sup> Not surprisingly, as Himmelfarb reminds us ("Merkavah Mysticism since Scholem," p. 22): the *editio princeps* of all the fragments of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice appeared in 1985, three years after Scholem's death.

<sup>49</sup> Rachel Elijor, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004 [originally published in Hebrew, 2002, Magnes, Jerusalem]). Of the many articles (which often give a preview of what is said in the book or summarize the book's results) I mention only "From Earthly Temple to Heavenly Shrines: Prayer and Sacred Song in the Hekhalot Literature and Its Relation to Temple Traditions," *JSQ* 4 (1997), pp. 217–267; "The Merkavah Tradition and the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism: From Temple to Merkavah, from Hekhal to Hekhalot, from Priestly Opposition to Gazing upon the Merkavah," in Aharon Oppenheimer, ed., *Sino-Judaica: Jews and Chinese in Historical Dialogue* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), pp. 101–158; and "The Foundations of Early Jewish Mysticism: The Lost Calendar and the Transformed Heavenly Chariot," in Schäfer, *Wege mystischer Gotteserfahrung*, pp. 1–18. And see already Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, *All the Glory of Adam: Liturgical Anthropology in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 252ff., the publication of which coincided with publication of the Hebrew edition of Elijor's book.

<sup>50</sup> In "Foundations," p. 2, she explicitly connects herself with Scholem's brief remark in *Jewish Gnosticism*, p. 128, that refers to the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice.

<sup>51</sup> I refrain from giving full references in each case. For a thorough analysis of her work and a devastating critique of most of her major theses, see Himmelfarb, "Merkavah Mysticism since Scholem."

ond Temple who were forced to leave the defiled sanctuary and took refuge in Qumran, that is, the Qumran library in the fullest sense of the word; and (3) the Hekhalot literature.<sup>52</sup>

3. All these three stages are characterized by three absent Temples (hence the title of her book) and all the three literatures preserved in these three stages are the product of priestly circles (yes, also the Hekhalot literature).<sup>53</sup>

4. The Qumran library is not (or at least only to a certain degree) the library of the Qumran sectarians but “originated in the Temple library that was created and guarded for centuries by priests and prophets and was taken by the deposited priests when they were forced to leave the defiled sanctuary.”<sup>54</sup>

5. Elior is not particularly forthcoming with regard to how she defines “mysticism,” although, as Himmelfarb has observed, “a definition is implicit in her work and could be extracted with proper care.”<sup>55</sup> In her 2006 article she gives the following definition: “Mysticism in the present context refers to literary traditions which assume the everlasting existence of transcendental heavenly counterparts of the ritual world of the Temple and the Levitical priesthood.”<sup>56</sup> What she does not say in her brief definition but is clearly included is the presupposition that this “mysticism” constitutes itself in a peculiar relationship between the heavenly ritual of the angels and the ritual world of the earthly priests (priestly angels and angelic priests performing an angelic liturgy in a heavenly sanctuary that has replaced the destroyed or defiled Temple on earth).

Elior’s taxonomy of early Jewish mysticism and her definition of this “mysticism” are quite surprising, to say the least, and we will see whether or not they are based on a fair picture of the evidence (however, I have serious doubts as to whether Scholem would have agreed with them). But they are, of course, in line with her main thesis, that early Jewish mysticism developed out of the priestly traditions that were collected in the Temple library and preserved in Qumran. Yet this is precisely the question that looms large with her schema and definition,

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<sup>52</sup> Ezekiel does not serve as a separate stage in Scholem’s taxonomy (although his vision is clearly also for Scholem the starting point of everything that would come later in Jewish mysticism), whereas Scholem’s second stage (the rabbis) has disappeared in Elior. Scholem’s first stage and Elior’s second stage correspond (with the omission of Qumran in Scholem), as do both their third stages.

<sup>53</sup> In “Foundations,” pp. 17 f., she reduces the schema to just “two chapters of Jewish Mysticism in late antiquity,” namely (1) “the traditions centered on Enoch and the priestly library that have commenced in angelic teaching of divine knowledge and concentrated on the priestly solar calendar, the angels, the chariot and the sevenfold angelic liturgy which were written before the Common Era,” and (2) “the Heikhalot and Merkabah literature, written after the destruction of the Temple and incorporating similar topics.” This second chapter, as she explicitly states, “reflects the dialectical continuity with its priestly sources” (ibid.).

<sup>54</sup> Elior, “Foundations,” p. 17.

<sup>55</sup> Himmelfarb, “Merkavah Mysticism since Scholem,” p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> Elior, “Foundations,” p. 3.

for both are bought at the great cost of unabashedly or naively (or both) harmonizing the sources in order to extract from them a common priestly ideology.<sup>57</sup> Obviously, according to Elijor, there is no early Jewish mysticism outside the realm of priestly ideology,<sup>58</sup> or, to put it differently, all disenfranchised priestly ideology is “mystical.”

Elijor’s sweeping pan-priestly approach has been met with much interest and approval, at least in certain scholarly circles. April DeConick in her essay “What Is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism?” attests that Elijor “has set forth the most comprehensive thesis that I am aware of” and approves of her premise that the priestly worldview or cosmology indeed informs the mystical discussions within early Judaism and Christianity.<sup>59</sup> Most recently, Philip Alexander, having subjected the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice to a fresh examination, categorically declares:<sup>60</sup>

There *was* mysticism at Qumran. This mysticism arose not at Qumran itself but in priestly circles in Jerusalem, from where it was taken to Qumran and adapted to the community’s particular needs. This mysticism was the historical forerunner of later Jewish Heikhalot mysticism, and should now be integrated into the history of Jewish<sup>61</sup> mysticism.<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, and quite in contrast to Elijor, Alexander is convinced that this “new” attempt to “trace Jewish mysticism firmly back to Second Temple times” contradicts the paradigm established by Scholem, who, in Alexander’s words, “was reluctant to date the origins of Jewish mysticism much earlier than the third century CE.”<sup>63</sup> I am not sure that this statement accurately reflects Scholem’s point of view,<sup>64</sup> since, as we have observed, Scholem is much more sophisticated with regard to the prerabbinic stage of the first phase of Jewish mysticism.<sup>65</sup> We

<sup>57</sup> This is also one of Himmelfarb’s main points; see her “Merkavah Mysticism since Scholem,” pp. 24, 36.

<sup>58</sup> This claim becomes particularly difficult with regard to the Hekhalot literature because it presupposes that the bulk of this literature is of priestly origin – a very bold claim indeed. See the critique of Himmelfarb, “Merkavah Mysticism since Scholem,” pp. 34 ff.

<sup>59</sup> April D. DeConick, “What Is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism?” in eadem, *Paradise Now*, pp. 10 f.

<sup>60</sup> Interestingly enough, without explicitly mentioning Elijor but instead emphasizing the connections with the earlier works of Johann Maier and Ithamar Gruenwald.

<sup>61</sup> And, as he later concludes, also of Christian mysticism: “These comments ... are surely sufficient to make at least a prima facie case that Qumran mysticism belongs somewhere in the genealogy of Christian as well as of Jewish mysticism” (*Mystical Texts*, p. 143).

<sup>62</sup> Alexander, *Mystical Texts*, p. VII (Alexander’s emphasis); see also p. 137.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>64</sup> Although, to be fair, Alexander is acutely aware of the fact that Scholem effectively ignored the earlier antecedents and increasingly concentrated on mysticism in a rabbinic milieu, as I have argued above as well.

<sup>65</sup> One needs much patience to fully understand and appreciate what Scholem says, not least because he is a master of the art of “give and take,” that is, of developing his argument in a dialectical process rather than in linear progression.



will see whether or not our analysis of the Qumran sources – in particular the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice and the Self-Glorification Hymn – supports the thesis of Qumran as the primary source feeding early Jewish mysticism.

## 2. *Unio mystica*

Since the *unio mystica*, the mystical union of the adept with the divine, is regarded as the backbone of most definitions of mysticism (that is, in religions envisioning a personal God), and since Scholem was reluctant to give special weight to this distinctive feature, scholars have quarreled over its application to Jewish mysticism. Moshe Idel, one of the most fervent critics of Scholem, even goes so far as to accuse Scholem of implicitly, if not deliberately, suppressing in his vast research that particular strand of Jewish mysticism of which the mystical union is characteristic. Idel distinguishes between two major strands in Jewish mysticism, the theosophical-theurgical and the ecstatic. The former he defines as mythic or mythocentric, symbolic, theocentric, sefirotic (that is, designing the system of the ten Sefirot, the ten dynamic potencies within God), nomian (that is, centered on the Halakhah), canonical, exoterically open to all Jews, less mystical, and not interested in the union with God, whereas to the latter he deigns to grant the attributes anthropocentric, esoteric, sublime, anomian, individualistic, intended to induce paranormal experiences, mystical par excellence, and indeed aiming at the union with God.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately for Idel, Scholem's verdict that "a total union with the Divine is absent in Jewish texts"<sup>67</sup> has been accepted by most modern scholars of both Jewish as well as general mysticism. Even worse, Idel holds, Scholem's emphasis on the theosophical type of Jewish mysticism and his neglect of the ecstatic type has led some scholars to conclude that Jewish mysticism, since it is devoid of the essence of mysticism, should not be called mysticism at all.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, this negation in Jewish mysticism of the *unio*

<sup>66</sup> Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. XI ff.; idem, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism," in Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan, eds., *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: 50 Years After* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1993), pp. 117–143.

<sup>67</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 59. Idel does not refer to Scholem's full discussion of the subject in the introductory chapter to *Major Trends* and in the chapter "Merkabah Mysticism and Jewish Gnosticism," but quotes only the following sentence from his chapter on Abulafia: "It is only in extremely rare cases that ecstasy signifies actual union with God, in which the human individuality abandons itself to the rapture of complete submersion in the divine stream. Even in this ecstatic frame of mind, the Jewish mystic almost invariably retains a sense of the distance between the Creator and His creature" (*Major Trends*, pp. 122 f.).

<sup>68</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 59 f.; idem, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah," pp. 133 ff. On Idel's problematic taxonomy, see also Peter Schäfer, "Ekstase, Vision und *unio mystica* in der frühen jüdischen Mystik," in Aleida and Jan Assmann, eds., *Schleier und Schwelle: Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation V*, vol. 2: *Geheimnis und Offenbarung* (Munich: Fink, 1998), pp. 101 ff.

*mystica* as the core of mysticism, Idel concludes, assumes with Christian scholars like Carl Jung and Robert C. Zaehner (a well-known historian of religion of Scholem's generation) an overtly anti-Jewish bias. As a prime example of this bias Idel quotes Zaehner:

If mysticism is the key to religion, then we may as well exclude the Jews entirely from our inquiry: for Jewish mysticism, as Professor Scholem has so admirably portrayed it, ... would not appear to be mysticism at all. Visionary experience is not mystical experience: for mysticism means, if it means anything, the realization of a union or a unity with or in something that is enormously, if not infinitely, greater than the empirical self. With the Yahweh of the Old Testament, no such union is possible. Pre-Christian Judaism is not only un-mystical, it is anti-mystical. ... [I]t is therefore in the very nature of the case that Jewish "mysticism" should at most aspire to communion with God, never to union.<sup>69</sup>

The Christian bias of the sentence about the "Yahweh of the Old Testament" is unmistakable, and Scholem would certainly not want to exclude Jewish mysticism from mysticism, but does this necessarily mean that Zaehner's distinction between "communion" and "union" is wrong (notwithstanding the question of whether or not one is inclined to call such a communion "mysticism")? After all, Philip Alexander, definitely not prone to anti-mystical attitudes, has recently made the very same distinction between "communion" (which he assigns to "theistic systems, which in turn are conscious of an unbridgeable ontological gap between the Creator and the created") and "union" (which he reserves for pantheistic systems).<sup>70</sup> In Idel's attempt to prove that the ecstatic type is the dominant strand in Jewish mysticism and that the striving for mystical union is therefore its predominant characteristic, one cannot avoid the impression that he is driven more than necessary by a zeal to turn almost everything Scholem wrote on its head. In any case, when we look for his proofs of the notion of a mystical union in the early phase of Jewish mysticism (Merkavah mysticism), we find remarkably little. Although he includes Merkavah mysticism in the ecstatic strand (because for him it is by nature "ecstatic"), his chapter, "*Unio Mystica* in Jewish Mysticism," in *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*<sup>71</sup> jumps immediately into the ecstatic Kabbalah proper<sup>72</sup> and does not deal with Merkavah mysticism at all,

<sup>69</sup> Robert C. Zaehner, *At Sundry Times: An Essay in the Comparison of Religions* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 171.

<sup>70</sup> Alexander, *Mystical Texts*, p. 8; see also above, n. 27.

<sup>71</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 59–73. Fletcher-Louis, *All the Glory of Adam*, p. 3, declares simply – and simplistically – that Scholem's judgment regarding the place of *unio mystica* in Merkavah mysticism "has now been rightly rejected by those who have taken up his challenge that scholarship take Jewish mysticism seriously" and refers, as one of his major proofs, to precisely these pages in Idel's *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. See now also William Horbury, *Herodian Judaism and New Testament Study* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), p. 49, with n. 4.

<sup>72</sup> He is, however, convinced that certain conceptual structures of the (later) Kabbalah can be (re)discovered in pre-kabbalistic texts, in particular in the talmudic, gnostic, and Merkavah

except for a couple of sentences about the transformation of Enoch into Metatron, which falls for him under the category of a unitive experience.<sup>73</sup> Influenced mainly by Abulafia's peculiar kind of mysticism, Idel takes the idea of a Jewish *unio mystica* to the extreme.

Among contemporary scholars, Elliot Wolfson has made the most progress regarding a typology of the mystical experience that does not just include (alleged) ancient manifestations of Jewish mysticism but instead takes these ancient manifestations (apocalypses, Qumran sources, Hekhalot literature) as starting point of the inquiry.<sup>74</sup> Responding to a paper by Qumran scholar Bilhah Nitzan,<sup>75</sup> Wolfson finally gets to the root of the problem by stating that the modern scholarly tendency to focus on mystical union as the very essence of mysticism is informed by Neoplatonic ontology, namely, the assumption that "contemplation of God results in a form of union whereby the soul separates from the body and returns to its ontological source in the One. Insofar as the One is beyond intellect and being, the return to the One is depicted in figurative terms as a mystical merging of the soul in the Godhead."<sup>76</sup> This Neoplatonic model, he posits, is alien to the Jewish sources:

The Jewish sources, beginning with the apocalyptic and Qumran texts, may provide a different model based not on *henosis*, but rather on the "angelification" of the human being who crosses the boundary of space and time and becomes part of the heavenly realm. ... The mystical experience in this framework involves as well a closing of the gap separating human and divine, not, however, by the return of the soul to the One, but rather by the ascension of the human into the heavens. ... In my opinion, the word "mysticism" should be used only when there is evidence for specific practices that lead to an experience of ontic transformation, i. e., becoming divine or angelic. Accordingly, it is inappropriate to apply the word "mystical" to the unison or harmony of human and angel if there is no technique or praxis that facilitates the idealization of a human being into a divine or angelic being in the celestial abode.<sup>77</sup>

Here we finally rid ourselves of the model of *unio mystica* as the ultimate litmus test for the quality of a mystical experience. Instead, now is introduced the notion of heavenly ascent as leading to an ontic transformation of the adept and resulting in his angelification or deification. According to this definition, Wolfson finds "mysticism" in the ascent apocalypses (which he does not discuss), the so-called Self Glorification Hymn from Qumran (but not in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice) and, most prominently, in the Hekhalot literature. The advan-

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mystical literature. He calls this approach "reconstructionalist"; see his *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 32 ff.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>74</sup> Wolfson, "Mysticism," pp. 185–202.

<sup>75</sup> Bilhah Nitzan, "Harmonic and Mystical Characteristics in Poetic and Liturgical Writings from Qumran," *JQR* 85 (1994), pp. 163–183.

<sup>76</sup> Wolfson, "Mysticism," p. 186.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186f.

tage of this definition consists in the fact that it does not impose a terminology on the ancient texts that is alien to them (such as “mystical union”) but takes the experience described in these texts as its starting point: the ascent of a human individual to heaven that is indeed seminal to the apocalypses and the Hekhalot literature (while being less so for the Qumran sources). Also, there can be no doubt that in some of these texts the individual undergoes a bodily alteration that transforms him into an angelic being. This is particularly true for the ascent apocalypses and probably also for the Qumranic Self Glorification Hymn, but the Hekhalot literature poses a problem. The prime example for the transformation of a human being into an angel, of course, is Enoch’s metamorphosis into the highest angel Metatron. But Wolfson wishes to go much further. For him, the major Hekhalot texts involve not only an ascent of the adept to the heavenly realm and his participation in the heavenly liturgy; rather, “a critical part of the ascent experience is the enthronement of the *yored Merkavah*, either on the chariot itself or on a throne alongside the throne of glory”; and it is this enthronement of the adept “that transforms him into an angelic being, a transformation that facilitates his vision of the glory and the hypostatic powers of God that are active before the throne.”<sup>78</sup> Through this ingenious move Wolfson manages to declare angelification an essential part of the Hekhalot literature as well. I discuss the textual basis for this interpretation in my concluding chapter.

Finally, in using the term “deification” alongside the term “angelification,” Wolfson avails himself of another artifice. He never explains the two words but simply pretends they are both the same (employing them as a binomial and mostly connecting them with the innocent conjunction “or”). But are they really the same? True, human beings are sometimes transformed into angels, but does this also mean that they are “deified,” that they become God? I suspect that Wolfson reaches his equation of angelification with deification by identifying the angels acting before God’s throne with “hypostatic powers of God,” thus placing God and his angels to a certain extent on an equal plane; hence, if the angels are in fact “hypostatic powers,” then it makes little difference if the mystic is angelized or deified. But are the angels really hypostatic divine powers – or could it be that Wolfson succumbs here to Neoplatonic categories alien to the apocalyptic, Qumranic, and Hekhalot literatures? This question and its implications are likewise discussed in my concluding chapter.

## Origins

For Scholem, as we have seen, the rise of mysticism out of or rather within the husks of the institutionalized classical form of religion coincides with the ro-

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

mantic period of religion.<sup>79</sup> Hence, romanticism is the catalyst of mysticism: once romanticism breaks through the solidified forms of religious institutions, the mystical phase of religion is born. This phase, moreover, is characterized by a revival of mythical thought and therefore, to some extent, constitutes a return to the “old unity which [institutionalized] religion has destroyed, but on a new plane, where the world of mythology and that of revelation meet in the soul of man.”<sup>80</sup> So, more precisely, mysticism brings religion back to its old mythical roots – roots that were covered by the agglomerating sediments of religion’s institutionalization.

In his quest for the origins of mysticism, emerging at a certain point in space and time in the history of a given religion, Scholem reveals himself to be a true heir of evolutionary models within the history of religion, seasoned with a heavy dose of German romanticism. As to the former, he clearly presupposes a linear development, beginning with the innocent “childhood of mankind” in primordial mythical times<sup>81</sup> and ultimately culminating in mysticism as the highest form of religion (its conflicting tendencies notwithstanding).<sup>82</sup> As to the latter, his romantic tendencies, these are much more obvious in *Origins of the Kabbalah* than in *Major Trends*. It is in *Origins of the Kabbalah* that he tries to uncover the remote and mythical “origins” of the Kabbalah in the “oriental” Gnosis of the first centuries CE,<sup>83</sup> whereas in *Major Trends* he remains rather vague about the origins of Jewish mysticism, apart from the proposition that Jewish mysticism originated in the romantic period of Judaism. But as we have already seen, this description reveals a certain tension, to say the least, since it seems to presuppose two different origins: one of “Jewish mysticism” in general and another one of “Kabbalah” in particular (although, to be sure, Kabbalah remains part of Jewish mysticism).

So the quest for origins appears to be highly charged territory. If we disregard the tension between “mysticism” and “Kabbalah,” mysticism, according to Scholem, can nevertheless be seen to emerge (despite its mythical roots in prehistoric times) from very real historical circumstances: it is the driving force that transforms institutionalized religion into something new, a higher and revitalized form of the religion under discussion. This dialectic between mysticism’s mythic origins and its historical manifestation is obviously what Scholem tried to capture in the tricky German title of his book on the origins of the Kabbalah, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbalah*; that is, literally, origins and beginnings

<sup>79</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup> Ultimately seeing mysticism as a universal condition of humanity in Underhillian terms.

<sup>83</sup> See in more detail my *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 218 ff.

(or early stages)<sup>84</sup> of the Kabbalah, with “beginnings” so conspicuously dropped from the title of the English translation.

But what does this mean for the Jewish religion? What is the institutionalized form of the Jewish religion out of which mysticism emerged? Scholem remains in this regard rather vague. In terms of the lowly spheres of chronology, as we have already seen, he wavers between the first century BCE and the talmudic period for the emergence of the first stage of Jewish mysticism; and with regard to the substance of the institutionalized religion he clearly has in mind rabbinic Judaism, which for him serves as the epitome of a halakhically oriented form of Judaism: only when the Halakhah becomes too rigid (this is the underlying premise) is it time for mysticism to break through and inaugurate a new era.

As has been observed by several scholars, this definition of rabbinic Judaism is in itself problematic.<sup>85</sup> To portray rabbinic Judaism as entrapped within the rigidity of the Halakhah and therefore in need of the liberating forces of mysticism smacks ominously of certain Christian prejudices. Also, if mysticism is a reaction to rabbinic Halakhah, one would expect the emergence of mysticism to occur at the peak of halakhic development (let’s say with the appearance of the Bavli) and not at its beginnings (with the appearance of the Mishnah). But Scholem needs to have the early stage of rabbinic Judaism in the first two centuries as the hotbed of mysticism because R. Ishmael and R. Aqiva, the most important rabbis of tannaitic Judaism, also happen to be the heroes of Merkavah mysticism – although the first half of the second century CE can hardly be characterized as the epitome of rabbinic Judaism’s halakhic obsession. Moreover, if the institutionalized religion of rabbinic Judaism triggers mysticism, how then can the “anonymous conventionalities of the old apocalypics,”<sup>86</sup> as Scholem puts it, be included as the first stage in his taxonomy of the first phase of Jewish mysticism? The ascent apocalypses were certainly not motivated by any particular halakhic considerations, and although Halakhah plays an important role in Qumran, no one would wish to classify the Qumran sect as a specific form of institutionalized Jewish religion (Scholem, for his part, makes no attempt to consider the Qumranic Halakhah).

Scholem’s description of the origins of the earliest manifestation of Jewish mysticism is a tangle of contradictions. With his attempt to incorporate the pre-rabbinic apocalypses into nascent mysticism, he sensed something important. Yet he was reluctant to follow this intuition, not just, as he specifies (if not uses as an excuse), because “to do so would involve a lengthy excursion into historical and philological detail”<sup>87</sup> but first and foremost, I venture to say, because he was transfixed by his own definition of the origins of mysticism.

<sup>84</sup> “Early stages” is what the English translation uses for *Anfänge* in the first sentence of the first chapter of the book (Scholem, *Origins*, p. 3; see the full quotation above, n. 34).

<sup>85</sup> See the apt summary in Alexander, *Mystical Texts*, p. 137.

<sup>86</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 45.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

## The Origins of Jewish Mysticism

Bearing in mind Scholem's grandiose but ultimately failed scheme, not to mention the attempts of his successors, it would seem futile to try to design a theoretical model of the origins of Jewish mysticism within the developing Jewish religion. The term "origins" as the mythical source from which something arises or springs out of the primordial past,<sup>88</sup> and which, to be sure, in due time substantiates itself under certain historical circumstances that, for their part, mark a crucial turning point in the history of the respective religion – this term "origins" has proven to be highly problematic. It will therefore come as no surprise that I will not be using the term in this sense. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the necessity of determining the historical conditions under which a certain phenomenon arises. After all, we start with the assumption that "mysticism" is not an ideal construct suddenly descended from heaven but a historical phenomenon that has established itself in space and time. So I will use the term "origins" in a much more modest sense, namely, as the beginnings of something that has subsequently been labeled "Jewish mysticism." And with "beginnings" I do not mean an absolute and fixed beginning at a certain place and time but a *process* that extended over a protracted period and was not bound to one particular place. Moreover, I do not envision this process to be linear and progressive; on the contrary, I expect it to materialize differently at different times and places, not in a linear development from A to B to C but as a polymorphic web or network of ideas that are not free-floating but manifest themselves in certain practices of individuals as members of certain communities. Whether these ideas can be tied together under a common denominator – for example, "mysticism" – or whether they ultimately fall apart into *disiecta membra*, scattered limbs, fragments of something that in fact never achieved unity, remains to be seen. But this common denominator, if one does indeed exist, can only be determined at the end of our investigation and not as some theoretical construct at its beginning. Hence, I will employ a heuristic model of inquiry, merely allowing the historical process to unfold instead of trying to prove something that has been established from the beginning, in the double sense of the beginning of my research and the beginning of the manifestation of the phenomenon.

The same is true for "Jewish mysticism," the other part of our investigation's taxonomy. I deliberately refrain from any preconceived definition of mysticism and use the word (in fictive quotation marks) only because it is the label that

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<sup>88</sup> This is the definition of the word "origin" as given by *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 7 (repr. Oxford 1961), p. 202. More precisely, "origin" denotes both the source from which something springs as well as the act of arising or springing; see *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., vol. 10, p. 933. The same is true for the German *Ursprung*, which literally means "that which rises or springs from something primordial"; see Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 11.3, ed. Karl Euling (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1936), cols. 2538–2545.

scholarly tradition has long attached to the texts I will be treating. But of course I keep in mind those definitions that have been suggested by scholars of mysticism in general and Jewish mysticism in particular, some of which have been discussed above. I make no secret of my reservations regarding the view that the *unio mystica* is the epitome of mysticism, including its Jewish incarnation, and I also make no secret of my preference for definitions that take as their starting point the literary evidence as it has been preserved to the present day. Indeed, I start with the assumption that it is our task to allow each set of texts and each community represented by certain texts to speak for themselves, to tell us what it is they find important and wish to emphasize. To be sure, the various texts and communities have not volunteered as subjects for this enterprise; rather, it is I alone who has decided which texts representing certain authors or communities to include in my inquiry. Yet this dilemma can hardly be avoided unless one wishes to cast such a wide net that the exercise becomes useless. That being said, with regard to the material basis of this study, I have not attempted to reinvent the wheel but rely entirely on the corpus of texts that has emerged in a long tradition of previous scholarship.

Hence, I ultimately and deliberately juggle two unknowns, “origins” and “mysticism.” In analyzing certain core texts I attempt to capture and describe the “toponymy” and nomenclature of these texts on their own terms, but of course always with an eye to what they may or may not contribute to the question of “mysticism.” I am aware of the vicious circle that such a pointedly pragmatic approach entails, but I believe there exists no other or better solution that at the same time avoids the risk of imposing a preconceived definition on the texts. As has already become clear with the term “origins,” I am even prepared, as far as “mysticism” is concerned, to accept a result that declares it to be a category of no real use or meaning within the history of the Jewish religion and that ultimately pronounces it dead.<sup>89</sup>

My methodology arises from these clarifications. Taking the texts as my starting point, I am interested in methods that are most suitable not just for solving textual problems but also for bringing out what the texts themselves seek to convey. Accordingly, methods that do justice to the linguistic and historical parameters of a given text still seem to me most appropriate, and I am not afraid of resorting to the allegedly old-fashioned and outdated historical-critical method – a method that, in the post-Scholem era, serves as a scapegoat for almost everything that (supposedly) went wrong with Scholem’s approach. This method, however, does not confine itself to philological exercises; on the contrary, it takes the historical circumstances surrounding the texts very seriously. It is concerned with locating the various phenomena under discussion in their historical contexts

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<sup>89</sup> See Boaz Huss, “The Mystification of the Kabbalah and the Myth of Jewish Mysticism,” *Pe’amim* 110 (2007), pp. 9–30 (in Hebrew). I return to this question in my concluding chapter.



and not just seeing them as free-floating entities beyond space and time. If this method is able to connect given phenomena diachronically, this does not necessarily presuppose a linear development of essentially the same “thing” – indeed, quite the opposite: it reckons with substantial changes over time that ultimately challenge the “identity” of the phenomenon. But in no way does it aim at a synchronic description of a phenomenon detached from space and time.

If one wishes to discover in my methodological preferences elements of what has been classified as the “phenomenological” approach, propagated by Moshe Idel and his followers, then so be it – to a certain extent. Idel defines this approach as follows:

Thus, my approach uses phenomenology in order to isolate significant phenomena and only thereafter to elaborate upon the possible historical relationships between them. In other words my starting point is the unfolding of the phenomenological affinity between two mystical patterns of experience, preceding their historical analysis per se. Hence, the phenomenological approach also serves historical aims, although not exclusively.<sup>90</sup>

This statement is not as innocent as it sounds. To be sure, I am also interested in “significant phenomena” that may be related to “mystical patterns of experience,” but, unlike Idel, who apparently knows from the outset what these phenomena are, I leave open the question as to what may or may not be judged mystical. Moreover, and most important, I do not believe that such “mystical patterns” can be discovered and delineated – let alone compared with each other – outside their respective historical contexts. Thus, I do not think that one can neatly distinguish between the isolation of “pure” mystical phenomena as such and their subordinated historical condition. Both belong together, and furthermore, both come before the next step, namely the evaluation of the possible historical relationship between related phenomena.

In fact, despite his rather moderate and modest definition, Idel’s phenomenological approach runs the risk of dehistoricizing the phenomena it is looking at and establishing an ahistorical, ideal, and essentialist construct.<sup>91</sup> This becomes

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<sup>90</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. XVIII f.

<sup>91</sup> The most recent example of this approach is Idel’s *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (London: Continuum, 2007). It offers many new and creative insights, but methodologically it presents a breathtakingly ahistorical hodgepodge of this and that, quotations from many different periods and literatures, pressed into scholarly sounding categories such as “apothotic” and “theophanic” but in fact lumped together by sentences like “Let me discuss now . . .,” “Let me/us turn to . . .” (the preferred phrase), “Interestingly enough,” “I would like to now address,” “In this context it should be mentioned,” and so forth. Constantly arguing against the usual suspects who, in his view, impose a wrong and simplistic logic on the texts, in this book Idel has developed his method of leaps in logic and intuition to the extreme. For a critique of Idel’s approach, see Lawrence Kaplan, “Adam, Enoch, and Metatron Revisited: A Critical Analysis of Moshe Idel’s Method of Reconstruction,” *Kabbalah* 6 (2001), pp. 73–119, and see furthermore Y. Tzvi Langermann’s critique of Yehudah Liebes, below, n. 94.

even clearer if one takes into consideration the fact that, according to Idel, the historical-philological method favored by Scholem and his school of secular academics results in an unbalanced preponderance of the theosophical-theurgical strand of Jewish mysticism (as found, for example, in the Zohar and in the Lurianic writings), whereas Idel's phenomenological method is open to the ongoing *living* experience of mysticism, including certain orthodox Jewish circles today.<sup>92</sup> Hence, what is ultimately at stake in Idel's version of the phenomenological method is mysticism as a timeless religious phenomenon that deserves not a "secular" historical analysis but a clarification of its practice. Idel's students went even further along this route and advocated a phenomenology that focuses on the universalistic aspects of the mystical experience (devoid of its historical constraints), on the mystical practice, and on its ramifications for our religious life today. In essence, this new approach uses academic scholarship and its results as building blocks for a new, postmodern mystical Jewish religion.<sup>93</sup>

It goes without saying that the extreme version of this approach must be reserved for practitioners of the Jewish religion – for how could a non-Jew contribute to this ultimate goal? – and thereby, in my view, deliberately abandons the realm of secular academic research in favor of a new theology, if not some New Age spirituality. If I, for one, feel excluded from such an enterprise – and indeed, prefer to be excluded – I nevertheless do not wish to judge the legitimacy of the enterprise. It may well have its place in the framework of some institutionalized versions of "Jewish thought" or "Jewish theology," but it should be aware of its exclusivity, and it cannot and must not pretend to be the most consequential and comprehensive approach to the Jewish form of mysticism in the post-Scholem era.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Idel, "The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia's Kabbalah," p. 131.

<sup>93</sup> See the illuminating review essay by Boaz Huss, "The New Age of Kabbalah Research: Book Review of Ron Margolin, *The Human Temple*; Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Issues Forth from Eden*; Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism*," *Te'orayah u-Viqqoret* 27 (2005), pp. 246–53 (in Hebrew). The use or rather misuse of the "phenomenological approach" in Vita Daphna Arbel, *Beholders of Divine Secrets: Mysticism and Myth in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), has been aptly criticized in Ra'anan S. Boustán's review in *JAOS* 125 (2005), pp. 123–126. Boustán rightly points out that Arbel completely ignores the long tradition of the phenomenology of religion school and instead favors a "spiritualizing psychological interpretation" of Merkavah mysticism that is "grounded in a fundamentally private, interior, and contemplative-meditative experience" (p. 124).

<sup>94</sup> For a devastating critique of the school of "Jewish thought" in Jerusalem – its neglect of history as a discipline and its exclusive reliance on "parallels" (*maqbilot*) – see Y. Tzvi Langermann, "On the Beginnings of Hebrew Scientific Literature and on Studying History Through 'Maqbilot' (Parallels)," *Aleph* 2 (2002), pp. 169–189. Reviewing Yehudah Liebes's *Torat ha-Yetzirah shel Sefer Yetzirah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 2000), Langermann concludes that Liebes "merely juxtaposes the sources; rather than constructing arguments, he relies on innuendo. Although he sometimes explains why he believes that a certain parallel is or is not significant, Liebes applies no consistent method of analysis to the parallels adduced" (*ibid.*, pp. 177 f.).

The scope of my inquiry in the chapters to follow is delimited on the one hand by the book of Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible as the starting point, and on the other by the Hekhalot literature as the first unchallenged manifestation of Jewish mysticism. Therefore, I am not interested in illuminating the relationship between Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah, a problem that has been so inadequately addressed and even conspicuously glossed over by Scholem and his heirs. Kabbalah as a distinctly medieval phenomenon that presumably begins in the twelfth century CE in Provence and extends well into our present day remains outside the parameters of my survey. Rather, I focus exclusively on that early phase of Jewish mysticism that Scholem has divided into three stages, the earliest of which (Qumran and related literature) others have identified as the birthplace of Jewish mysticism.

I begin with the famous first chapter of the book of Ezekiel – Ezekiel’s vision of the open heavens with the four creatures carrying God’s throne and the “figure with the appearance of a human being” seated upon this throne (chapter 1). Ezekiel’s vision sets the tone for the subsequent traditions: a fourfold relationship between and among a somehow accessible heaven, a human seer or visionary who has a vision, God as the object of this vision, and a revelation as the purpose of the vision. As to God, the object of the vision, the description goes remarkably far in Ezekiel’s case. He sees a human-like figure that still bears little resemblance to an ordinary man. The figure’s overwhelming impression is that of radiating fire: God’s body is of human shape but its essence is fire. Yet the appearance of God, however veiled or revealed, is not an end in itself. I demonstrate that it conveys a message to Ezekiel and his community (the vision is complemented by, or rather climaxes in, an audition), namely, the message that God is still there, in heaven, although the Temple will soon be destroyed. God does not need the Temple – the whole cosmos is his Temple, as it once was in the time of the patriarchs.

The second chapter turns to those ascent apocalypses that revolve around the enigmatic antediluvian patriarch Enoch, who, according to the tradition, did not die a natural death but was taken up by God into heaven. The first and oldest Enoch narrative, derived from the biblical *Vorlage*, is that of the Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 1–36: late third century BCE?), in which Enoch experiences a vision of God in heaven (ch. 14). Unlike his precursor Ezekiel, Enoch *ascends* to heaven, more precisely to the heavenly Temple, to see God on his throne; from now on the ascent becomes the predominant mode of human approach to the God who is enthroned in heaven. But Enoch only attains to the open door of the heavenly Holy of Holies from where he sneaks a peek – not at God but at

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“Nevertheless it seems to me that Liebes’ exclusive attention to *maqbilot* – along with his obliviousness to the limits of this method – stems from the relative neglect of the particular demands of historical writing” (ibid., p. 188). I thank Ra’anana Boustan for having drawn my attention to Langermann’s article.

his raiment behind a veil of fire. And as with Ezekiel, the purpose of the exercise is not the vision as an individual experience but is an audition, in Enoch's case, God's revelation that the Watchers will be condemned forever. This critique of the Watchers, who have defiled themselves and brought evil upon the earth, includes, I will argue, an implicit critique of the (rebuilt) earthly Temple: since the Temple in Jerusalem has also been defiled, the heavenly Temple has become the complete and perfect counterpart to the earthly Temple. Ultimately, God no longer resides in the Jerusalem Temple but has withdrawn to his heavenly abode.

This Temple-critical motif continues with the Testament of Levi, the next apocalypse to be discussed in this chapter. It has nothing to do with Enoch, but in its oldest form (the Aramaic Levi document) it has been dated to the middle of the second century BCE and attributed to the same circles whence the Book of the Watchers originated. Again, the vision of God is not the primary goal of this narrative (in a very reduced form of a vision, Levi sees "the holy Temple and the Most High upon a throne of Glory") but rather the message conveyed by God: Levi is invested with the insignia of the priesthood, yet unfortunately, his successors will not live up to the task. They will corrupt the priesthood until God appoints a new eschatological priest whose priesthood will endure forever.

The Similitudes or Parables of Enoch (1 Enoch 37–71: late first century BCE/turn of the era) and the Second Book of Enoch (first century CE) retell Enoch's ascent to heaven in the Book of the Watchers, but they add a new element that is alien to the earlier apocalypses: Enoch's transformation into an angel. Only hinted at in the Similitudes, this transformation plays a prominent role in 2 Enoch, where Enoch is stripped of his earthly clothes, anointed with holy oil, and dressed in heavenly raiment, clearly indicating his transformation from a human being into an angel. The angels, who make their first appearance as the companions and interpreters of the visionary during his heavenly journey in the Testament of Levi, become now the role model for the human hero, who aspires to be one of them, for it is only in angelic form that he can approach as close to God as he desires.

The third chapter also deals with ascent apocalypses, but now Enoch is replaced by a variety of heroes. The chapter begins with the Apocalypse of Abraham (after 70 CE), which still follows the older Temple-critical motif and lacks the explicit physical transformation of the seer. Instead, it grants the angel Iaoel, who accompanies Abraham on his journey, a God-like state, a kind of compensation for the fact that Abraham is not allowed to see God. However, the climax of Abraham's vision is his participation in the angelic liturgy, which may well imply his transformation into an angel. But again, this angelification of the seer is no mere end in itself: God reveals to Abraham the future history of Israel, with the desecration of the Temple and the necessity of its destruction at that history's center.

With the next apocalypse, the Ascension of Isaiah (early second century CE), we observe a decisive shift from the destiny of the community to that of the righteous individual. Isaiah, in ascending to heaven during his lifetime (like his predecessors) and in entering into a liturgical union (*unio liturgica*) with the angels, is himself transformed into an angel, the highest stage that a human being can achieve. But there remains a major difference between him as a member of the angelic company and the deceased righteous, who populate heaven together with the angels. In fact, the deceased righteous are superior to the angels (and hence to Isaiah in his present state) since only they can actually look at God, whereas the angels see him only vaguely. The ultimate transformation (into a deceased righteous) and vision (of God) is left to the last stage of Isaiah's human journey, when he returns to heaven as a deceased righteous. This last step is taken in the Apocalypse of Zephaniah (end of first century or beginning of the second century CE?), where Zephaniah's ascent to heaven is described as the last journey of the righteous soul to its place in paradise. God remains completely unseen – or else he got lost in the missing pages of the single remaining manuscript. Instead, as in the Apocalypse of Abraham, emphasized here is the God-like state of the highest angel (Eremiel).

The last ascent apocalypse to be included in my survey is the Apocalypse of John (written between 81 and 96 CE) because I regard it, despite its Christian provenance, as deeply indebted to the Jewish tradition. It has preserved many of the characteristics of its predecessors while transforming them into something intrinsically new. Here, the seer who undertakes the ascent recedes farthest into the background; his place is taken by the Lamb, Jesus Christ, who is the one at whom the revelation is directed and who is transformed – not just into an angel but into a divine power next to and of equal rank with God.

In chapter 4, I continue with the literature preserved in the Qumran community.<sup>95</sup> In retreating to the shores of the Dead Sea because of the pollution of the Jerusalem Temple, this community drives the Temple-critical motif to its extreme. Only they, the chosen remnant of Israel, achieve cultic purity as a priestly community that regards itself as living in communion with the angels. This communion can take place either on earth – when, during the eschatological battle between the “Sons of Light” and the “Sons of Darkness,” the angels descend to earth in order to lead the holy warriors to their final victory (War Scroll) – or it takes place (presumably) in heaven, when, during their liturgical worship, the Qumran sectarians join their voices to the praise of the angels (Hodayot). I use the word “communion” here deliberately, since it must remain an open question as to whether or not the members of the community envision themselves, during their joint worship with the angels, as being transformed into angels. The same

<sup>95</sup> An earlier version of this chapter appeared as “Communion with the Angels: Qumran and the Origins of Jewish Mysticism,” in Schäfer, *Wege mystischer Gotteserfahrung*, pp. 37–66.

is true, I will argue, for the hymns collected under the title Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. It is only in the so-called Self-Glorification Hymn that the hero of this text imagines himself to be elevated among the angels in heaven, that is, actually and physically to be transformed into an angel.

Contrary to the prevailing trend in research on Jewish mysticism (or even in Qumran scholarship) I contend that the vision of God plays a strikingly marginal role in the Qumran texts and much less of one than in the ascent apocalypses, where the vision at least is the goal of the ascent (although its details often remain rather vague). I demonstrate that in all of the analyzed texts, the visual aspect of the enterprise is almost completely neglected. The same is true also for the other important ingredient of the experience as described by Ezekiel and the ascent apocalypses – the ascent. In the Qumran texts there is no description of the ascent, be it of the community at large or of the individual that boasts of his elevation among the angels. I therefore do not see any basis for the claim that the Qumran community constitutes the incubator that hatched Jewish mysticism and that the Qumran literature finds its mystical completion in the Hekhalot literature.

With the fifth chapter treating Philo, we enter a completely new realm, the realm of a Jewish philosopher who was deeply imbued with the ideas of Plato and their Middle Platonic offspring. Now, for the first time in Jewish history and the history of the texts with their respective communities that we discuss, the biblical and postbiblical unity of body and soul has been abandoned in favor of a radical and constitutive separation between body and soul. The body is portrayed as the prison of the soul, while the latter, being of divine origin, longs for its release from this prison and a return to its place of origin. This Platonic concept has far-reaching consequences for our subject. I posit that Philo is by no means concerned only with the postmortem return of the human soul to its divine origin; he also holds that the souls of certain individuals (including his own) can undertake, during their lifetime, a “heavenly journey” that lifts the individual’s soul up in a state of ecstasy and frenzy and transforms it into a kind of divine essence. If anywhere in the Jewish tradition it is here, I argue, that we encounter the idea of the divinization, yet not of the human being in his body and soul but solely of his soul (which, moreover, no longer remains “his” soul in the strict sense of the word but is replaced by a divine essence).

The complex and extensive rabbinic evidence of Ezekiel’s Merkavah and related traditions are discussed in two chapters. The first of these, chapter 6, begins with the public exposition of Ezekiel 1 in the synagogue and with the famous restriction in *m* Hagigah 2:1 regarding the biblical subjects of forbidden sexual relations (Lev. 18/20), creation (Gen. 1), and the Merkavah (Ezek. 1). I demonstrate that the former is concerned with the public presentation and exegesis of the biblical text of Ezekiel, not with some kind of mystical experience, whereas the latter shifts the emphasis from the public realm of the synagogue to a pri-

vate teacher-student relationship in which the “dangerous” biblical subjects of creation and the Merkavah in particular are perceived as an esoteric discipline reserved for the rabbinic elite. But there can be no doubt, in my view, that these rabbis understood the respective biblical texts as material for exegetical exercises and not for ecstatic experiences that aim at an ascent to the Merkavah in heaven.

The Mishnah’s harsh restriction is illustrated by a cycle of seven stories that the Tosefta attaches to the Mishnah and that also appears in the Yerushalmi and the Bavli, albeit in different contexts and in a different sequence. I discuss these stories as separate units in the sequence in which they appear in the Tosefta, but in each case I compare the Tosefta version with the versions in the Yerushalmi and the Bavli, respectively. My analysis concludes that these seven stories, in the earliest form that we can reconstruct, focus not on a mystical experience but on the *exegesis* of what they call the “work of creation” (Gen. 1) and the “work of the Merkavah” (Ezek. 1) as an esoteric discipline. Unlike the authors of the ascent apocalypses, the rabbis seek their God not through an ascent to heaven but through exegesis. However, there are clear traces in some of the stories, particularly in the Bavli, that later editors tried to adapt them to the Merkavah mystical ascent experience.

Having discussed the seven Tosefta stories as separate and quasi-independent units, in my seventh chapter I turn to the structure in which they are presented in the two Talmudim; that is, I analyze the respective contexts in which the Yerushalmi and the Bavli processed them. I show that the Yerushalmi editor leaves no doubt as to his concern with the exegesis of problematic biblical passages and that he, within the array of such passages, seems to have placed more weight on the exposition of the work of creation than on the exposition of the work of Merkavah. Moreover, although he appears intent on softening the strict ruling of the Mishnah, he does not display any mystical-experience leanings in his exposition of the Merkavah. The Bavli editor also emphasizes his interest in the Merkavah as an exegetical discipline, but unlike his Yerushalmi colleague he could not help imposing on his exposition of the Merkavah elements that do indeed smack of “mystical” experience. I suggest that he received these elements from outside sources that were strong enough to compel him to include them. But it also becomes clear that he nevertheless felt obliged (as well as strong enough) to neutralize and rabbinize this in his view dangerous and unwelcome material.

With chapter 8, we finally tackle the Hekhalot literature, that is, the literature that for almost every scholar embodies the first climax of the fledgling mystical movement within Judaism: Merkavah mysticism. I again adopt a heuristic approach. Instead of choosing and reconstructing certain key concepts out of the voluminous and chronologically as well as stylistically and thematically disparate literary material, I follow the given sequence of some of the major Hekhalot

texts (Hekhalot Rabbati, Hekhalot Zutarti, Shi'ur Qomah, and 3 Enoch) as they are preserved in the manuscripts and try to evaluate what they have to tell us about our subject in their own terms and within their respective context. What emerges is a highly complex and multilayered network of ideas that cannot and must not be reduced to the heavenly journey of the mystic and his climactic vision of God in the highest heaven. In its multifarious complexity, the Hekhalot literature offers us much more than just a report on the ascent of certain rabbis, and it is one of the goals of this chapter to capture this “more” and to put the ascent traditions in their appropriate frame of reference as presented by the editor(s) of the texts.

I demonstrate that in Hekhalot Rabbati we encounter a clear tendency to disappoint or even frustrate our expectation of the depiction of God on his throne (to be sure, an expectation cunningly fueled by the editor), wishing instead to impress us with endless and exhausting descriptions of the heavenly liturgy, of which the adept becomes part. But as I will argue, this strategy seems to be quite deliberate, since it is not a *unio mystica* that our editor wishes to convey but rather a *unio liturgica*, a liturgical union of the Merkavah mystic with God through his participation in the heavenly liturgy that surrounds God's throne. Moreover, and more important, I posit that this liturgical union is again, as in some of the ascent apocalypses, no end in itself; rather, within the narrative composed by the editor of Hekhalot Rabbati, it serves to convey the message that God continues to love his people of Israel on earth, even though the Temple is destroyed and the Merkavah mystic must undertake his dangerous heavenly journey to visit God on his throne in the heavenly Temple. It is this message that God wants the Merkavah mystic – the new Messiah – to bring down to his fellow Jews as the ultimate sign of salvation.

Quite in contrast to Hekhalot Rabbati, the text labeled Hekhalot Zutarti in some later manuscripts puts great emphasis on the magical use of the divine names. To be sure, in a certain layer of it we do find ascent traditions similar to those of Hekhalot Rabbati, but even these are adapted to the editor's main message, namely, that the ascent primarily results in neither a vision of God nor in the adept's participation in the angelic liturgy but in the knowledge of the divine names and their proper use. In addition, the communal orientation so conspicuous in Hekhalot Rabbati gives way to a much more individualistic or even egoistic approach in Hekhalot Zutarti, with R. Aqiva and his students as the heroes. And the angels – in Hekhalot Rabbati, primarily the guardians of the heavenly palaces and the guides of the worthy mystic – become the forces that are at the adept's disposal for the accomplishment of a successful magical adjuration.

Next follows a survey of the Shi'ur Qomah fragments preserved in the Hekhalot literature; that is, the traditions that assign God gigantic body dimensions to which hundreds of unintelligible names are attached. My analysis of the respective texts in the Hekhalot literature goes against the grain of the thesis in-



augurated by Scholem and accepted by many scholars, namely, that the mystic's vision of the gigantic body of God serves as the climax of his ascent. Quite in contrast to this still prevalent trend in research, I hold that what is at stake here is not the dimensions of God's body but the knowledge of the appropriate names attached to the limbs of God's body and, consequently, the magical use of these names. Furthermore, I argue against the suggestion made by Scholem and others that the Shi'ur Qomah traditions are essential for the Merkavah mystical speculations, that they are a particularly old layer of the Hekhalot literature, and that they emerged out of the exegesis of the biblical Song of Songs. Finally, I compare the Shi'ur Qomah traditions in the Hekhalot literature with some related evidence that has been adduced from Jewish, Gnostic, and Christian sources, and I propose that it was originally angels in the Jewish tradition to whom gigantic dimensions were attributed. Only when the idea of vast angelic dimensions was usurped by the Christians did the (later) Jewish traditions – as they are preserved in the Shi'ur Qomah – transfer these gigantic dimensions to God and claim that they were suitable for God alone, and not for angels or other figures that might dispute God's position as the one and only God.

The last subsection of this chapter turns to the Third Book of Enoch (3 Enoch), in my view the latest offspring of Hekhalot literature. Here, the ascent of a rabbi (Ishmael) to the highest heaven recedes in importance; instead, the human being Enoch returns as the main hero of the text. In a way that is unparalleled in the ascent apocalypses as well as in other texts of the Hekhalot literature, Enoch is physically transformed into Metatron, the highest angel in heaven, and is assigned the unique title "Lesser YHWH." Against an increasingly fashionable trend in modern scholarship, I insist that we need to take the rather late date of 3 Enoch seriously and cannot connect Enoch's transformation into Metatron directly and monolinearly with early (pre-Christian) Jewish traditions – such as the hypostasized "Wisdom" and "Logos" or the "Ancient of Days" in Daniel with the "Son of Man" as his allegedly younger companion – in order to utilize Metatron for the reconstruction of an (early) "binitarian" Jewish theology. In contrast, I posit that Enoch's transformation into Metatron in 3 Enoch may well be a *response* to the New Testament's message of Jesus Christ as the divine figure second only to God who takes his seat in heaven "at the right hand" of God. Understood this way, Metatron, as the antagonist of Jesus, completes and ultimately concludes the movement of the Merkavah mystics. The human individual who ascends to heaven and returns from there with God's message to the people of Israel is replaced by a human-divine savior figure who, from his heavenly abode, intercedes on behalf of God's beloved people on earth.